

Pin Oak Problem

This is Scott Roy with the Missouri Department of Conservation Private Land Services bringing you today's Soil and Water Report. This past week I have received several inquiries from homeowners about unsightly brown bumps on the leaves of their pin oak trees. While definitely unsightly you will be glad to know that the effect on your pin oak is only aesthetic.

These brown bumps are leaf galls formed by a tiny microscopic wasp. There are a variety of gall-forming species of small wasps that commonly infest oak. With the large natural population explosion this year, next year should not be quite as bad. Other insects such as aphids or mites can cause galls to appear on the leaves or twigs as well as some types of bacteria, nematodes and fungi. Galls are abnormal plant growth or swellings comprised of plant tissue.

In general, most leaf galls on oak do not affect the health of the host tree. A few can cause leaves to drop prematurely, or distort them so that photosynthesis is interrupted. Once the gall appears on the leaf, there is no way to control it. Preventing most leaf galls is extremely difficult.

Chemical control is seldom suggested for management of leaf galls on oak. Cultural methods of control may be effective in reducing the impact of these insects. Some fallen leaves may harbor various life stages of gall-producing pests. Therefore, it may be useful to rake up and destroy all infested fallen leaves. Some of these pests overwinter in twigs and branches of oak. Where such woody galls are detected, prune and destroy the infested plant material when the galls are small and have just started to develop. These measures may help to break the wasp's life cycle.

In short, the best medicine for your pin oak if it is infested with galls is water and fertilizer to help reduce stress. Leaf galls, while unsightly, should not kill the tree and usually natural controls will keep the population from repeating next year.

